

# Reader explains conditions of Mexican workers

28 August 1998

Dear Editor,

Yet another immigrant has died trying to cross the border in the desert heat. It happened at Salton Sea, near El Centro, California over the weekend. A 25-year-old woman died in spite of attempts by her fellow immigrants to bring help. At the California border, crossing between Tijuana and San Isidro, normally a 30-minute hike, has been turned into an ordeal that lasts anywhere from eight or nine hours to more than a day.

Bill Vann (Death on the US-Mexico Border - 20 August, 1998) is right when he refers to the irony of unfettered capital movements between nations, while military forces prevent people from crossing.

One would think that with the building of factories in Mexico, more would choose to stay. Yet, at the San Isidro border alone, over 30,000 are expected to cross this year, a 20 percent increase over 1997. In fact, every year more workers join the labor force than there are jobs. Those that do get jobs earn less per day than US workers earn in an hour.

In 1997 Mexico had 3,833 export oriented factories (maquiladoras), employing over a million workers. Together they account for 40 percent of Mexico's exports. Yet the success of maquiladoras has not raised the living standards of the workers. In Ciudad Juarez, for instance--which has 360 maquiladoras, and 200,000 maquiladora workers--not only are wages low, but there is a large army of unemployed, housing shortages, prostitution, etc.

This last weekend, the Ciudad Juarez daily *El Diario* reported that thousands were crossing the border into El Paso, Texas to buy school supplies for their children. The Mexican Peso has lost 20 percent of its value since July to 10 to the dollar. In expectation that prices would increase even further, shoppers were jamming the bridges that connect these two cities. Prices for school supplies and uniforms have risen 20 percent in Mexico

in the last year.

Workers that were earning five dollars a day in July are now earning four. Inside Mexico, before the devaluation, the cost of the everyday staples that poor people buy has skyrocketed in the last year. Corn tortillas have gone up by 42 percent, for instance. Real wages have dropped nearly 30 percent.

The conditions of Mexican workers have yet to reach the levels before the 'tequila crisis' of 1994 and the severe recession that followed. Now, the flight of capital and the drop in oil prices make conditions even worse. Every time petroleum prices drop, the government revises its budget and cuts back on social spending. This has happened three times this year. There are reports that the Mexican Oil Company PEMEX will lay off 30,000 workers. Altos Hornos de Mexico announced that up to 3,000 steelworkers will be laid off, and 1,500 others forced to retire. The Lazaro Cardenas steel mill has cut workers' production bonuses by 10 percent. The Asian economic crisis is being blamed for this.

Further forcing workers into the US is a very serious drought in Northern Mexico that has affected the lives of farm workers and farm families. Workers in those areas literally face the choice of risking death by crossing into the United States, or seeing their families die slowly of malnutrition and disease.

In the past, some in Mexico considered the migration of Mexicans into the US as a type of safety valve to relieve social conflict. There is no doubt that tighter controls on the border will increase class tensions. Already at the border industrial belt, there has been an increase in industrial struggles, led by unions independent of the government. So far this year there have been important labor struggles.

Last December auto parts workers at Hun Young, a supplier for Hyundai in Tijuana, disaffiliated with the

official union (CTM) and joined the Authentic Labor Front. Strikes against 10 of the largest maquiladoras in Matamoros followed. At its high point these involved 13,000 workers. In May of this year Hun Young workers also struck. Strikes were also reported in fiercely antiunion Ciudad Juarez .

Away from the border there have been important struggles by teachers in Oaxaca State, farm workers in Sinaloa and auto workers in Mexico City and railroad workers across the nation. Each of these struggles challenges the corporatist structure that has managed class conflicts in Mexico for the last 60 years.

While Canadian and US unions have given some support to these struggles, their own interests are with the capitalists of their own countries. Careful not to mobilize their own members in support of their Mexican brothers and sisters, they are pursuing legal means, in Mexico and the US, under the NAFTA treaty, to break the CTM monopoly.

What is lacking is a political party, a united strategy and a socialist program of the North American working class to present every sector of society with an alternative to the impoverishment and inequality on both sides of the border. That task confronts workers today.

The death of immigrants will not deter further repression across the border. The US government is already carrying out plans to place a double fence in the Tijuana area, with a 'no man's land' in between. The authorities intend to landscape that middle strip to make it difficult for immigrants to traverse, and easier to patrol. From their standpoint, the only obstacle to completing that work is environmental concerns that the wildlife of the area will suffer. The death of 92 immigrants is collateral damage.

GN

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See Also:

Death on the US-Mexico border

[20 August 1998]



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